Media Sensationalism May Be Gone, But Criminal Element Remains

Between the Army Corps of Engineers' ruling on the Dakota Access pipeline easement and the bitter cold North Dakota winter, one would expect the NoDAPL protest movement in Morton County to have subsided, if not completely disappeared. Unfortunately for our citizens and law enforcement officials, this has not been the case.

Just this past weekend, on New Year's Eve, while most were ringing in the new year, approximately 75 protesters sought to overrun a group of six law enforcement officers who were on duty near Highway 1806. Over the remainder of the weekend protesters repeatedly tested law enforcement's response and patience at the Backwater Bridge on Highway 1806 by advancing on, tampering with, and damaging the barricades.

Unfortunately, these events followed similar protest activities earlier in the week, and these actions have become the new normal for residents of Morton County. On Tuesday, December 27th protesters once again engaged in criminal trespassing after law enforcement were forced to respond to multiple protest events around Highway 1806.

The afternoon escalated from around twenty protesters tampering with the barricades on the Backwater Bridge to around 100 protesters at the bridge damaging public property and stealing North Dakota Department of Transportation equipment. During the day, around 80 protesters also attempted to siege a nearby hill they have been repeatedly warned is private property and some were overheard claiming they planned to return with rifles.

These threats are taken very seriously by our law enforcement and for the remainder of the day they were forced to operate with the concern that an individual within the larger group of protesters may be armed. Not only could this obviously endanger the lives of law enforcement, but it could seriously endanger the safety of those protesters legally engaging in their First Amendment rights.

Several weeks ago law enforcement agreed to pull back from the barricades at the Backwater Bridge in a good faith effort to deescalate the situation, under the condition that protesters stay off of the bridge as well. The events of this past week are just a few of countless instances in which protesters have violated that agreement. It seems that some in the protest camps have no interest in deescalating the situation and are only looking to provoke law enforcement into action.

In fact, the recent criminal protest activity has brought the number of protesters arrests up to 556, with a mere 6.5% of those individuals coming from North Dakota. 25 of these protesters have a history of criminal violence, including domestic violence and child abuse; 32 have previously been cited or arrested for drug possession; 22 have a history of driving under the influence of drugs or alcohol; and 31 have a history of theft, robbery, or burglary. Many of these are the protests who remain in Morton County, endangering our citizens, threatening our law enforcement, and disrupting our community.

Most outside of Morton County may think that because the cameras are gone and the celebrities have stopped showing up that everything has returned to normal here, but make no mistake, there remains a contingent of professional protesters still looking to escalate the ongoing situation in our county and make the lives of our citizens that much more difficult. Morton County will continue to work with all levels of law enforcement to root out the criminal element, and hold law breakers accountable. The citizens of our county and state deserve to live in peace without the threat of violence and criminal activity, and working together that will most certainly be accomplished.

Cody Schulz, Chairman
Morton County Commission
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